

THE MONOSYLLABLE MACHINE (PART 1)

HARRY B. PARTRIDGE

Manhattan Beach, California

A late June day's unseasonable heat caused by Southern California's own native foehn, chinook, harmattan, khamasin, sirocco, or simoom, known in the Southland as the Santa Ana wind, found me again in Dr. H. K. Wombat's cool and spacious study, The Marsupium, filled with the fragrance of strawberries as the maestro and I sipped enormous milk shakes prepared by the furry savant's elegant and enigmatic housekeeper.

Suddenly the good doctor uttered a funny explosive noiselet. I would have thought that he was trying to blow some rosy froth from the hairs on his rhinarium which serve him in lieu of a moustache, but he had just delicately dabbed it with a fine lawn handkerchief which he extracted from inside the left cuff of his seersucker jacket, for some reason disdaining to use his linen napkin. The miniature explosion sounded distinctly like 'spliff'.

"Pardon me, my dear doctor, did you say something?"

"Yes," replied he, "I said 'spliff'."

"And does that have any meaning?"

"Yes, indeed, but I leave it to you to guess. The background is this: a local beach paper tells of a maiden flying from Amsterdam to Ja or Jah, as she calls Jamaica, the land of reggae, ganja, and rum. The damsel is apparently not a California golden girl, since is looking forward to her 'first-ever no-line tan'; but soon after landing on that troubled island she and her Australian paramour are all wrapped up in a spliff in 'hedonistic Port Negril' as the travel agents tout it."

"Hm-m-m," hm-m-med I. "Let's see: a convoluted initial tri-graph; a high, thin vowel; a surd continuant of indefinite prolongation or extension. That suggests 'wrap', 'light', wide'. Hedonism lurks in the background with the poluphloisboiatatotic surf a-booming on the white Caribbean sands. This could be kinky. I'll say spliff is some sort of diaphanous but, let us hope, opaque tissue in which to wrap oneself when engaged in venery on the beach."

Dr. W's fur-fringed lips drew back in amusement and he gave two claps with his little brown hands. "Bravo, se non e vero, e ben trovato! Unfortunately not so, but a good shot. And the second clap applauds your avoidance of 'hopefully'! Spliff has nothing to do with camouflage for hunting on the strand, although it is, to be sure, not only kinky, but also stinky, for it is a cheroot of tobacco and Cannabis sativa -- in other words, a joint masquerading as a cigar."

"And why, may I ask, do you inject that unpleasant object into this delightful ambiance?" I inquired, waving an arm around at the book-laden walls and damask draperies.

"Because it is a word generated by my new methodical monosyllable machine which has proven to have a meaning. The other words in the series, that is, S + P + L + one of the 15 other English vowels or diphthongs + F, have as yet no meaning -- they are just lying there to be brought to life by an infusion of significance."

"Your monosyllable machine? Just how does it work and what does it do?"

"I can with more ease tell how it works than say just what it does. In fact, there are almost no bounds to what it may do," quoth my friend, and went on. "Our tongue is famed for its words made up of but a sole string of speech sounds which, when you take them as a group, have but one strong stress and no weak stress at all. We call such a group or word a monosyllable. These words turn up so oft in our speech that it is but rare that our minds are struck by the wide life such words lead. Proof of this is that since the start of my small speech here (which has not yet come to an end) I have used but one word which is not a monosyllable -- and that word is that same word 'monosyllable'. Since monosyllables, then, make up the weft and woof of the tongue we were born to speak, to try to pin down just what a monosyllable is bears great weight in my thought."

"Whoa," I raised my hands in a warding-off gesture. "You don't have to continue talking in monosyllables."

"Yes, it is somewhat of a strain, but sometime I will show you the 50,000-word monosyllabic picaresque novel that I have written." Dr. W stared dreamily into the distance, as though envisioning a scene from that opus. But then, with a start, he continued.

"The monosyllable deserves a great deal more study. Leonard Bloomfield's discussion of English monosyllables in Language and Benjamin Lee Whorf's paradigm for generating English monosyllables in Language, Thought, and Reality are both interesting. Each of these men, however, neglects certain initial and final consonant clusters which I include in my machine; their general approach differs from mine; and their treatment of the vowels is less than perfect. Bloomfield's discussion omits words like MIDST, WHILST, and DIDST because he strives for too much concision and starts from a grammatical concept of the

monosyllable. Whorf states positively and falsely that "the simplest possible formula for a monosyllabic word is C + V," forgetting AWE, OWE, ERR, EYE, etc. Well, to get back to the machine, first I must give a list of the meaningful sounds of English."

My heart had fluttered as the funny furry fellow fearlessly flirted with lese-majeste toward Sts. Len and Ben, and, glad to be able to say anything, I remarked "You mean phonemes, I suppose."

"Yes, my meaningful sounds are phonemes, I suppose; but I don't trouble myself with terms like that. Since Prince Nicholas Trubetzkoy advanced the phoneme concept a couple of generations ago every eager linguist in the world has thirsted after his very own -eme, even as our ex-presidents thirst after their very own libraries. Now we are so bedeviled with -emes that any modern theory of language is positively emetic. The only -eme with which I concern myself is the ultimate -eme, the ememe, which I have discovered and will one day reveal in all its naked primordiality to a waiting world."

He paused, and I used the pace for reflection, finally saying, "Those words OWE and ERR: the first one is just a long vowel, but long vowels in English are really diphthongs; while the second is just the R sound. You evidently consider R a vowel. Then why are not L, M, and N also vowels?"

"First," came the answer, "we won't get into the phonetics of long vowels in English, which do indeed all end in a consonantal or semiconsonantal glide (the long vowel in 'father' excepted, of course): for example, the vowels in THEY, HE, FOE, and YOU. Yes, R is a vowel when alone, or before or after consonants, but not before or after vowels; and in English it cannot occur after the vowel in BUT. There that vowel is dropped and we speak only the R. BIRD might just as well be written BRD (and we do write the word BR-R-R with no vowel but an R). L, M, and N are also vowels, but only when unstressed (as in BOTTOM, BUT-TON. BOTTLE)."

"And HM-M-M is an exception?"

"Quite so. Even Hawaiian with its poverty-stricken consonantism routinely produces rather exotic consonants in interjections, just as we click the tongue extra-alphabetically and represent the sound by TSK. But 'Nicht so vieles Federlesen, lasst mich immer nur herein' -- stop this damned nitpicking and let me get on with the subject -- as Goethe says.

"The meaningful sounds in English are the following." The hirsute sage betook himself to a blackboard leaning against some boxlike object covered with a blue baize cloth on a table to the side of his desk. Here he wrote out the following lists:

SHORT VOWELS

sasvi = sounded as
the short vowel in

A sasvi PAT
E sasvi PET
I sasvi PIT
O sasvi PAW
U sasvi PUT
UH sasvi PUTT
R sasvi PURR

LONG VOWELS

salvi = sounded as
the long vowel in

AH salvi PA
EY salvi PAY
IY salvi PEA
OW salvi PO'
UW salvi POOH

DIPHTHONGS

sadi = sounded as
the diphthong in

AY sadi PIE
AW sadi POW!
OY sadi POY
YUW sadi PEW

Dr. W then commented: "The vowel or diphthong ending any word on the above list can end any other word in which it occurs; the short vowels shown cannot end normal words. U cannot begin a normal word. UH cannot end normal words, except A and THE. R is classified as short, but may also be long (as may any short vowel), depending on emphasis."

"This can get pretty complex," I interjected.

"Yes, it can; so let us take a break now and discuss the consonants and possible monosyllables later on. After that we can cover the embodiment, use, and philosophy of the methodical monosyllable machine. In the meantime we can soothe ourselves by listening to the latest Wagner recording by Zuw bin-Miytbol and the Salami State Symphony Orchestra."

QUERY

Jeff Grant asks: can Word Ways readers discover in some gazetteer a place name of the form OO- SPRINGS? or a Scottish dialect spelling, OOTSPRINGS (for 'outsprings') or OON-SPRINGS (for 'unsprings')? Can Word Ways readers verify the existence (for example, in a telephone directory listing) of a person named LES -UNNELS? At least in the United States, Runnels or Gunnels are the most likely possibilities.